

30SHORTG.DOC

A sharp-sighted lady wrote last week from Montana asking about the poison weed situation in New Mexico. She and her husband wanted to relocate, but wanted an expert opinion on toxic plants before they traded ranches. Her letter was brief. She did mention she read the *Livestock Weekly*.

There was no way of knowing the generation represented. The important thing, however, was that they recognized we Shortgrass Country ranchers are the world's leaders on the subject of toxic ranges.

In 1990, the Texas A&M Research Center in San Angelo declared the 1260 acres south of my ranch house grows the most fatal strain of bitterweed yet to be tested in a laboratory. In the open classes, no-holds-barred contests of wool clips, lamb crops, and bright grandchildren, no decision reaches my supremacy in the fields of bitterweed ranching.

Thanks to a long life, my dear old mother was able to see her son honored. For 60 years of her span, she bore up under the news of how fine so-and-so Noelke's wool clip was, and how soggy the calves were off cousin so-and-so's place. In those last innings, however, she could throw back her shoulders and say, "My son, Monte, has the most poisonous bitterweed ever tested in a lab."

In my reply to the Montana letter, I am going to advise that land traders have wiped out all the toxic weeds in the

ranches listed to sell. Thirty years ago, I covered all corners of the near Southwest. I waded off horseback into the vegas of the Pecos River in Texas and climbed steep sierras in the Sangre de Cristos on a gentle mule east of Santa Fe. Commissioned by a northern buyer, I wrote reports noting old style Aermotor windmills and evaluated dilapidated improvements and made wild guesses at stocking capacities. The only thing overlooked was the reason the fences and windmills needed replacement. Representing a buyer had its limits. I wasn't about to blow my fellow herder's cover, and tell why in 54 years of ownership, he still lacked four gates having the money to buy chain for the latches.

But in all those presentations (and a lot of action was taking place on ranches in those days by out of state buyers) not one outfit had a sprig of loco or a stalk of goldenrod that the salesmen could find. Here I'd ranched all my life where the first lesson an old pony learned was dragging dead sheep out of the sick pen to find that forage in the Pecos River Valley and on up north was as healthy as the salad bar in a medical school cafeteria.

Today, I am too far behind on things to advise a lady where to ranch. New Mexico, for example, has developed a new breed of cattle or a new breed of coyotes since I worked there. Slick magazines keep writing of the cattle on New Mexico ranges protecting sheep from coyote depredation. The

last three decades must have been mighty hard on the packs and mighty invigorating for the herds.

Texas cattle and coyotes are sure different. All along, reports come from cow outfits to the north of us of coyotes attacking cows down calving and leaving them in a pitiful wounded condition.

I keep trying to think if I ever saw a guard cow. In 1956 or 1957, the Big Boss ordered troughs built out of one-by-six boards to keep the cake out of the dust. The point might be stretched far enough to say those old sisters hung around guarding those new troughs while waiting for the next handouts.

Some mighty touching stories have come out of the West about sheepdogs pulling kids from dirt tanks and some ol' boy being rescued because his horse knew the shortest route back to the oat bin after he'd stumbled and broke the waddie's hind leg. But if an old milk cow has ever bellowed in the night to warn of an Indian attack, or an oxen mooed to save a wagon train, historians have sure kept the story quiet.

So I am going to tell the lady to sell her Montana cattle before she moves and be careful that the fiercer coyotes up there don't follow her to New Mexico, as she may want to run a few barbados as test cases for bovine guarding and prairie wolf prevention.

The best advice to remember, however, is that magazine writers in New Jersey often overshoot the marks writing about range life in the Land of Enchantment ...